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AUTHOR Ianni, Francis A. J.
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ABSTRACT

Rather than viewing youth as an isolated and alienated subculture, it is more useful to view the needs of youth as largely determined by where and how they live, and to recognize that they differ from one another just as adults do. Professionals and volunteers in community youth programs need to understand how the youth they work with experience the contextual differences of their environments, and how the services they provide can be facilitated or confounded by community differences. Each community's unwritten set of expectations and standards is its "youth charter." The community's charter must empower significant adults in youth's lives to provide needed services and supports. A youth program must take a multidimensional approach in an expanded social network to provide social support to community youth. Moralistic, compensatory, medical, and enlightenment models of helping can all be appropriately applied to given circumstances. An ecological approach to youth services can lead to the more effective use of the individual and network resources already in the community. (SLD)

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MEETING YOUTH NEEDS WITH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Youth as a Developmental Stage

Since the 1960s researchers have described youth—the 16- to 24-year-old cohort—as an alienated and isolated subculture. This perception of the youth experience as some unique state unconnected to an individual's life course has informed the ways that society defines the needs of young people. The result has been that much of the treatment strategy is remedial, aimed at correcting those dramatic youth problems that seem most pressing at the moment. It has ignored the more universal needs of youth.

It is more useful to view the needs of youth as largely determined by where and how they live, and to recognize that youths differ from one another just as surely as do adults. The existence of an "anti-adult" youth culture, isolated from the daily lives of our communities, is more myth than reality.

It is the local community, with its families, peer groups, schools, and other institutions—not some national, regional, cultural, or social force—that influences youthful behavior. The advice and influence of peers are salient for status issues such as clothing styles or musical tastes, but on questions about future plans and problems, especially those involving entry into adult society, youth depend on the advice of parents and other adult caregivers (Ianni, 1989). In fact, contrary to popular perception, youth are not in opposition to adults; they look to adults for a unified view of the requirements for social competence.

Differences in Community Approaches

Communities do not see all of their young people as the same. Every community, based on its own unique culture, "sorts" youngsters into real or imagined social and behavioral groups (Calhoun & Ianni, 1976) and responds to them accordingly.

Although most programs for youth are based on an intergenerational socialization model where adults attempt to provide guidance and experience (Ianni, 1989), they vary considerably in type. Some programs seek to enhance educational attainment or to divert youth from delinquency or substance abuse. Other programs take a broader approach, seeking to transform character, instill moral values, and direct youth toward rewarding and fulfilling lives.

While they may differ in approach and take place in a variety of contexts, all programs attempting to meet youth needs are interactive with and affected by their environment. Further, communities differ in their values and expectations, and, even within the same community, different social contexts—the home, the school, or the peer group—can provide different standards or models for behavior. Professionals and volunteers need to understand how the youth they work with experience those contextual differences and how the services they provide can be facilitated or confounded by those differences.

A Community's Youth Charter

More important to the successful development of youth than the impact of any single institution is the continuity and congruence of all the various institutions in their lives. Value confusion occurs when the social institutions youth relate to present conflicting values and expectations.

In addition, social institutions, and the community in general, must create a facilitating and caring environment that demonstrates the importance of such caring to youth. Integrating this sense of caring into their own personalities will enable youth to develop a socially competent identity.

Each community's unwritten set of expectations and standards is its "youth charter." While it is nowhere codified, every community has one, and both youngsters and adults know its behavioral limits. The youth charter establishes a relatively stable system of conventions and normative behavior, and provides role identities and ego ideals rather than expressing specific and definitive rules. It is through this charter that youth can learn about themselves, their social worlds, and their current and future place within them.

While each institution in a community can have a facilitating or restrictive effect on communicating a caring and supporting environment, multiple deficits can combine and reinforce each other to produce the feeling among youth that "nobody cares." Thus, it is important for a community's charter to empower significant adults in youths' lives to provide needed services and supports.

The Role of Social Support Systems

It is possible for a youngster from an emotionally impoverished family to feel cared about and to learn to care for others. A number of factors are involved:

First is the presence of caring adults and a caring public belief system to compensate for the missing supportive infrastructure in their homelife. Caring and helping are not simply a matter of heart or conscience. There are specific characteristics that young care-seekers look for in adults. While youngsters find it easier to identify with adults who are like them in gender, ethnicity, and language, they are most likely to turn to and bond with adults they think have the necessary knowledge, understanding, and interest to provide the help they need. For example, youngsters often mention their perception of mentors' physical responses

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such as "showing they don't care by leaning away from you or avoiding eye contact." But nothing seems to signal caring for youngsters so much as the helper's willingness to give time regularly and predictably.

Beyond the efforts of individual caregivers, a youth program must take a multidimensional approach rather than just comprise a series of unrelated components. A program's purpose should not be simply to provide a safety net. For example, while an initial intervention may consist of finding a youth a job or homework help, the first step extends the youth's social network to include other caring adults. This expanded social network allows the youth to experience an infrastructure of caring, perhaps for the first time in his or her life. In essence, what concerned professionals really do is, first, make the youth's life more predictable and, second, develop roles for them through which they can consolidate an identity incorporating "something larger" than themselves.

Models of Helping

Philip Brickman and his associates (1982) showed how the ambience of various models of helping affected the relationships between those giving and those receiving help:

- *Moralistic:* The person who creates a problem is responsible for its solution; failure to find a solution means that the person "lacks motivation" or is "lazy."
- *Compensatory:* While the individual is not responsible for the problem, he or she *is* responsible for the solution.
- *Medical:* The person being helped is neither responsible for the problem nor capable of solving it.
- *Enlightenment:* The person needing help is responsible for his or her own problems, but is unable to solve them without an external source of discipline (exemplified by Alcoholics Anonymous).

These models are reminders that the method of helping has an affect on those being helped. For example, youth who see themselves as responsible for solving problems they did not create can develop a negative or even paranoid view of their environment. The medical model can create an undesirable dependence in the person being helped. Also, different models can be age-appropriate in one case but not in others, as anyone employing the moral model with older adolescents discovers.

An Ecological Approach to Youth Services

Simply fostering better understanding and relationships between youth and adults or among youth, or delivery of youth services, will not transform communities. We need to proceed from the ecological assumption that human behavior and patterns of social relationships are not independent of place. Community is what gives continuity to caring about and meeting the needs of youth: it preserves and institutionalizes it.

The history of social movements should teach us that the institutionalization of behavior, not the modification of individual behavior, is what renders caring about youth and their needs community property (Ianni, 1967). To effectively teach youth the importance and benefits of caring about themselves and others, communities must become environments where it is desirable to be caring.

In institutions that facilitate the development of youth, "caring" is an explicit concern of their charter, as well as a dimension of their program activities. Most impressive is that a new etiquette facilitating both care-seeking and caregiving emerges and that teenagers seem to know where to look for appropriate forms of caring (Reuss-Ianni, 1983).

Agencies and social contexts perceived as caring consciously build relationships among elements of three domains—organizational culture, psychological climate, and roles and role relationships—that make caring a basic requirement. Youth in these programs are able to internalize program characteristics (such as caring) and use them as behavior guides even when they are outside the program context.

While the organizational context can encourage caring attitudes or behavior, it is in the smaller social networks where social support and self-valuation take place. In these interpersonal contexts—where trust, mutuality, and some form of reciprocity are expected and consistent—youth use caring-associated terms and show an understanding of their meaning. Indeed, the social environments and the dynamics of the relationships within and among institutions can be more important than the individual contribution of the family, the school, peer groups, or voluntary agencies.

Making successful youth development a priority in the community should not lead to the creation of a new bureaucracy, but to more effective use of the individual and network resources in the community. There are many opportunities for adult-youth interaction, and adults should use each to recast risks to be feared into challenges to be faced and see to it that no youngster faces them alone.

—Francis A. J. Ianni

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (212) 678-3433. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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